

SOUTH ASIA

Pakistan: Who Is Responsible for the Bloodbath in Peshawar?

Wednesday 8 February 2023, by [TAQI Mohammad](#) (Date first published: 3 February 2023).

In a country, where the last police strike was in the 1970s, police protesting publicly and virtually indicting the army for the losses in Peshawar is a very significant development.



A peace march for Peshawar on February 3. Photo: [Twitter/@BoloPakistan](#)

My hometown, [Peshawar](#), was doused in innocent blood yet again earlier this week.

A suicide bomber blew himself in a crowded mosque inside the Police Lines , just as the afternoon namaz had commenced. [Over a hundred](#) men, officers and civilians were blown to smithereens. Mass funeral prayers were held for many of the fallen men, near the same field where I had once watched the provincial and national hockey stars vie for the prestigious Police Gold Cup, and international greats like the legendary Dutch fullback Paul Litjens play against the Peshawar team.

It was heart-wrenching to see the once-calm environs covered with rows upon rows of insignia and flag-draped coffins. The Police Lines itself is named after a widely-respected former police chief, Malik Saad, who was killed in January 2007 in a bomb attack, a mere two-minute walk from my house inside the walled city of Peshawar.

We had lost over a dozen friends and acquaintances, including a much-loved local police deputy Khan Raziq in that attack. It seems that just can't seem to catch a break even a decade-and-a-half later. And along with the common people, the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) provincial police are the ones who have truly borne the brunt of the jihadist terrorism.

The current attack was initially claimed by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) but the terror outfit later distanced itself from the bombing. One of its affiliates, however, subsequently accepted responsibility for the heinous act. The KP police was swiftly blamed by commentators and officials for failing to secure its own headquarters, especially since it is located in the immediate vicinity of the provincial civil secretariat, the Peshawar High Court, and other government buildings.

The provincial [police chief has accepted responsibility](#) for his department's failure to preempt the attack or intercept the attacker, who is said to have been wearing a cop uniform at ingress. The top cop has indicated that the [attacker's accomplices might have had access to the premises](#) to bring in the explosive paraphernalia piecemeal, several days prior to the attack. The colonial-era Police Lines

were built somewhere in the 1880s and have evolved into a sprawling campus incorporating dozens of administrative offices, a sports complex, a hospital, and even residential quarters. While an airtight security cordon would have been most desirable, the location, layout and logistics of the complex make that nearly impossible.

That there was a massive security breach due to complacency at the entry point, and probably some help from an insider – whether an official or a civilian – is not moot. What is deeply disconcerting, however, is that a possible operational-level failure is being used to scapegoat the police for a colossal strategic disaster that the Pakistan army's Afghanistan policy, prosecuted through its jihadist proxies, has been.

There has been a marked uptick in terror attacks, especially against the civilian law enforcement agencies, in the KP and the Pashtun areas of the Balochistan province, since the Pakistan [army cut a deal with the TTP leadership in June last year](#). In what was ostensibly a ceasefire agreement, the army had actually agreed to repatriate thousands of TTP men along with their families, release scores of its men and give compensations for losses of life and property its cadres have incurred over the years.

In a shocking revelation, the TTP's chief Noor Wali Mehsud has claimed that his principal interlocutor, the former Director General Inter-Services Intelligence (DG ISI) Lt. General Faiz Hameed Chaudhry had accepted the TTP's demand to reverse the merger of the former Federally Administered Areas (FATA) with the KP. Mehsud told a journalist that he was perplexed at how easily the general conceded the demand.

The TTP honcho is said to have asked General Faiz – known thus in Pakistan – who was commanding the Corps XI based in Peshawar then, as to how he would deliver on the promise, especially since the reversal would be strongly contested.

General Faiz had apparently responded that he'll pull it off because he'd be the next army chief.

General Faiz was an ambitious man but the parleys with the TTP were fully backed by the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), General Qamar Javed Bajwa and the general staff. Both men have retired since.

The talks, however, were in line with the army's long history of siring, tolerating, occasionally fighting, and often negotiating with assorted jihadists, including the TTP. Starting with the [Shakai Agreement in 2004](#), the army has entered into at least 19 written and unwritten [agreements](#) with the TTP and its antecedents and affiliates, in as many years. And every single one of those has backfired. The jihadists have always reneged on their commitments, and used the reprieve gained through the ceasefire to regroup, recruit, and rebound with a vengeance. With each deal, the TTP gains tremendously.

By sitting across the negotiating table from the generals like Faiz, the TTP leaders increase their prestige among their jihadists cohorts, make the Pakistani state look weak, and send a message to the population and the civilian law enforcement that they are here to stay and should be feared. They have never actually signed a surrender instrument and have almost always extracted concessions from the army, including reparations and release of its men. This has invariably been followed by the TTP – flush with cash and cadres – consolidating its gains, and going after the local leaders and notables who resist its presence, as well as the police, whom they see as the major obstacle in their way. The police, on its part, has never been a direct party in the talks with the TTP, and functions in a strategic smog created by the army. The cops often don't know whether to fight or facilitate the TTP.

In the months following the ceasefire with the TTP, police, especially in the merged ex-FATA and southern districts of the KP were often told by the army and its intelligence operatives to go easy on or give safe passage to the TTP men who were being repatriated and rehabilitated. And that again has been the pattern for the past two decades, where the army has protected and enabled its favorite jihadists. A bewildered police force that gets zero guidance from the political leadership and mixed messages from the army's antics, can hardly be effective against a battle-hardened, war-trained enemy.

The cumulative effect is that the emboldened Taliban assert themselves, break whatever deal they had cut with the army, and unleash a reign of terror. And this time was no different than the previous cycles; the [TTP ended the ceasefire November](#) last year. It has since launched almost daily attacks and started [extortion even from the ministers](#) of the KP's outgoing Taliban-friendly, Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) government.

The TTP's strategy and tactics are rather clear. Unlike the last two decades when it controlled large areas in Malakand or Waziristan, it does not have a territorial swathe under its sway from where to launch its assault. It is relying on the hit-and-run guerrilla tactics and terror cells to carry out its attacks. Borrowing a page from its fraternal Afghan Taliban, the TTP decries and distances from attacks on the civilians and public places, while professing and claiming attacks on the security forces and installations.

The present assault, however, posed a dilemma since it attacked a mosque, but the target was the police. The TTP chose not to own it, and it really didn't need to. All indications point to its involvement. In the coming months, the TTP is likely to escalate its vicious attacks, in an attempt to bring the state back to the negotiation table and will try to squeeze a territorial concession out of it.

The key question, however, remains about the Pakistan army's calculus vis-à-vis the TTP. Why does it keep appeasing the TTP and cutting deals that invariably end in massive, blood-soaked disasters?

A suspected suicide attack near a mosque in Peshawar, Pakistan left dozens of people killed and many more injured on January 30, 2023. Photo: Screengrab via Twitter

The army had bet that after toppling what it deemed was an India-friendly republic in Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban would either restrain the TTP leadership or hand it to Pakistan on a platter. Despite all evidence to the contrary, the army brass has historically drawn an arbitrary distinction between the so-called good Taliban i.e., the one who attacked the Americans and the former Afghan government, and the ostensibly bad Taliban *a la* TTP, which attacked Pakistan.

For Pakistan's junta it was much more important to get rid of even the weak Afghan Republic that was friendly to India and the Pashtun and Baloch nationalists in Pakistan. And the Afghan Taliban were its ticket to success. That the Afghan Taliban and the TTP were joined at the hip, was not exactly lost on the army, but it effectively considered putting up with the latter - and the death and destruction they unleashed — as the [cost of doing business](#) with the former. After establishing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), the Afghan Taliban, however, refused to act against their ideological brothers who had also shared bread and bunkers with them.

In fact, after capturing Kabul, the Afghan Taliban sprung thousands of TTP fighters and several key leaders from the prisons of the fallen government. Now the Pakistani leadership has vowed not to negotiate with the TTP directly and proclaimed that [they'd talk only to the IEA](#). The [Taliban Foreign Minister has rebuffed Pakistan's allegations](#) that the attack was carried out from the Afghan soil and has asked Pakistan to introspect! With thousands of TTP cadres having moved back to Pakistan, the IEA now affords a very similar plausible deniability to what Pakistan had when it harbored the

Afghan Taliban. The Afghan Taliban are highly unlikely to act decisively against their TTP brethren not because of ideological reasons but also for practical ones. The IEA faces both an ideological and a battlefield challenge from the Islamic State in Khorasan (ISIK).

Coming down hard on the Pakistani Taliban leadership settled in Afghanistan, could be seen as an ideological revisionism by both the IEA and TTP cadres and push some fighters towards the ISIK. Pakistan can push the Afghan Taliban only so much. The IEA depends on Pakistan for a lot, including diplomatic support. But unlike the internationally isolated Emirate of 1996-2001 that harbored Osama bin Laden, the Afghan Taliban now have direct channels open to many countries, including the Gulf Sheikdoms, China and even India. Pakistan army, on the other hand, literally doesn't have any other ally in Afghanistan besides the Taliban.

It had put all its eggs in the Afghan Taliban's basket and is reliant exclusively on the IEA to sustain its decades-long Strategic Depth policy. And that is one of the key reasons the army tried to engage with the TTP, only to see it backfire, as predicted.

The problem, however, is that despite the loss of tens of thousands of Pakistani lives, most of them ethnic Pashtuns and religious minorities, the army brass declines to introspect. It refuses to acknowledge that its jihadist ventures have been absolute disasters, in which scores of servicemen have also perished. And in that callous denial the junta is joined by the mainstream political parties as well. For example, the chairman of the ostensibly liberal Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the country's current Foreign Minister, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari had called the [Afghan Taliban a reality](#) that should be engaged with, but described the [TTP as fitnah](#) - an Islamic term for strife and conflict. PTI's chief and the key opposition leader Imran Khan is an unabashed Taliban apologist, who had celebrated the fall Kabul to Taliban by declaring that Afghans had [broken the shackles of \(western\) slavery](#).

Similarly, the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz's (PML-N's) leader and current defence minister of Pakistan, [Khawaja Muhammad Asif had glorified the Taliban](#) after the Doha Agreement that the west may have the worldly strength but the divine powers are with them. The military and civil mantra in Pakistan used to be that the Afghan Republic was harbouring the TTP, and the regime's Indian patrons were training and arming it.

Now that the Pakistan-friendly IEA has been at the helm in Kabul, the same Khawaja Asif had the gall to say on a television show that India is guiding the TTP and has given them (battlefield) manuals. [Military](#) and [civilian](#) huddles are underway, and there is also a talk about another operation against the TTP.

Even before the Police Lines attack, Pakistani officials had suggested another round of [air raids against the TTP camps](#) on the Afghan soil and some analysts touted hot pursuit and even creating buffer zones inside Afghanistan like Turkey had done against the Kurds in Syria. The [airstrikes last year](#) had actually killed civilians and drawn muffled protested from the IEA. The TTP leadership was unscathed. Some [Pashtun nationalist leaders have alleged](#) that the army seeks to use this new round of terrorism, which is largely of its own making, into yet another dollar-minting enterprise by soliciting American patronage.

The fact remains that whether it is the TTP, the ISIK or the IEA, they all survive and thrive in the jihadist ecosystem that the Pakistani army has created and sustained, and unless there's an attempt to roll that back, there can't be a durable solution to the terrorism menace. With Pakistan's economy in dire straits, the army's immediate strategy seems to be to restrict the TTP to the ex-FATA areas by waging low-cost, low-intensity counterterrorism operations. Unfortunately, Pakistan's three largest political parties by and large subscribe to the army's Afghanistan policy.

And if they don't, they are too meek to call the junta out over it. The Pashtun regions are the ones most affected by the jihadist terrorism but in the grand electoral scheme of things, they matter little. Of the largest three political parties, the PTI has the biggest electoral stakes in the KP province, but it happens to be led by a man dubbed the Taliban Khan. The Punjab and Sindh provinces, respectively, remain the PML-N and the PPP's strongholds, and primary focus.

The traditional Pashtun nationalist parties have been weakened and sidelined for assorted reasons, over the years. The Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) and the newly-formed National Democratic Movement (NDM) are the strongest progressive Pashtun voices, including in the parliament, but aren't numerically strong enough to induce a policy change.

But since the TTP surge, there have been spontaneous public demonstrations in the Pashtun areas from [Swat](#) to [South Waziristan](#), demanding an end to the army's good/bad Taliban policy and repatriation of the TTP cadres. The local leadership of nearly all political parties ended up joining these protests, called the Ulasi Pashoon (people's uprising) in Pashto, but the central leadership was missing in action.

However, since the police protests in Peshawar following the mosque bombing, those leaders may not be able to keep riding the fence for long. In an unprecedented move, scores of police officers and men took to the streets to demonstrate against terrorism. They called for empowering the police and a clear stand against terrorism.

The police force was shocked, grieved and indignant after the attack. There were calls from rank and file to tender *en masse* resignations but eventually they decided to take to the streets and the slogans they raised were the same as those raised by the PTM, NDM and other critics of the army's jihadist policies. The most common refrain was that "yeh to namaloom hein, yeh humein maloom hein (those who are said to be unknown, are well-known to us)," which is a thinly-veiled reference to the army's jihadist protégés. In a country, where the last police strike was in the 1970s, the KP police protesting publicly and virtually indicting the army for the bloodbath in Peshawar, is a very significant development.

Pakistan's political leadership will ignore this resentment in public and police at its peril.

Mohammad Taqi

P.S.

- The Wire. 03/FEB/2023:
<https://thewire.in/rights/remembering-lateef-afridi-lighthouse-of-the-pashtun-left>
- Mohammad Taqi is a Pakistani-American columnist. He tweets [@mazdaki](#).